

WILLIAM WHITELEY – “UNIVERSAL PROVIDER”

Maurice Harp

William Whitely, the son of a corn factor of the same name, was born at Arbrigg, near Wakefield, on 29th September 1831. By June 1848 he had given up working with his brothers on his uncle's farm and



became apprenticed as a draper's assistant to Messers Harnew & Glover of Wakefield. After paying a visit to the Great Exhibition in 1851 he came to the conclusion that London would be a good base. The Fore Street Warehouse Co employed him in 1852 and after about ten years, he had managed to get together £700 to open his own shop in Westborne Grove, Bayswater. In 1866 Whiteley added general drapery to his

business, opening by degrees shop after shop and department after department, till he was able to call himself the “Universal Provider”, and boast that there was nothing that his stores could not supply. The extract below from Kelly's directory of 1877 gives some idea of huge range of goods Whiteley sold.

William Whitely, Westbourne Grove

31, Hosier, glover, shirt maker & gentlemen's outfitter

33, Taylor & draper, uniforms, liveries, riding habits etc.

35, Trunks, portmanteaux & travelling equipage

37, Costumes, evening dresses, prints, calicoes & general drapery

39, Silks, velvets, dresses, general mourning, funerals completely furnished, tombs &c.

39, Counting house, shipping, banking, money exchange, auctioneering, house agency, insurance, coals, lost property & general information office

41, Ladies & children's hosiery, gloves, haberdashery, trimmings, ribbons, flowers, berlin wools, dyeing, cleaning &c.

43, Lace, millinery, baby linen & ladies' & children's complete outfitting, umbrellas, sunshades, furs &c. trousseaux & indian outfits

45, Mantles, shawls & mantle cloths, court & general dressmaking

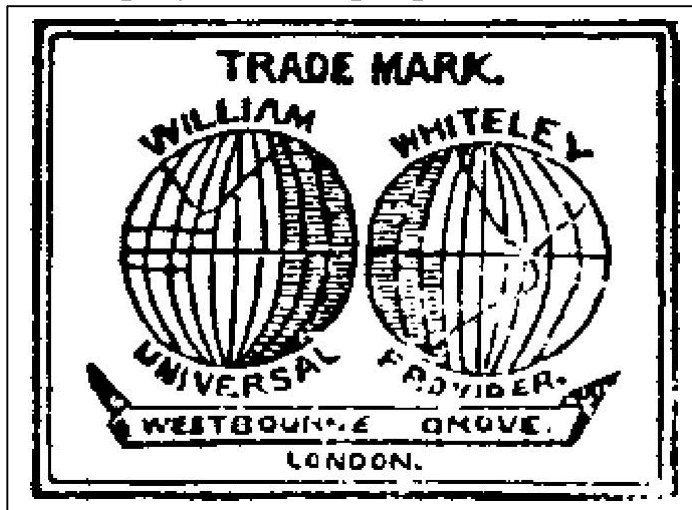
47, Jewelry, plate, stationery, English & foreign fancy articles, drugs, patent medicines, perfumery, printing, bookbinding, stamping &c.

49, Ladies', gentlemen's & children's boots, shoes & hats, india rubber & waterproof goods, toys, games, tents, marquees &c. refreshments, confectionery

51, Family & household linen, blankets, muslin, lace & leno curtains

53, Furniture, curtains, reps, cretonnes, general upholstery, carpets, rugs &c. ironmongery, tin ware, glass, china &c.

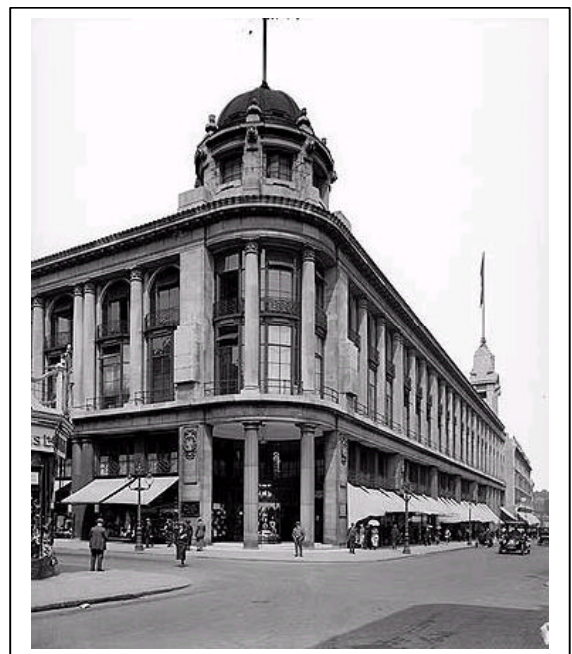
By 1876 he had 15 shops and an expanding “orders by post” business and employed 2000 people. He did this by buying up other shops in



the area, cutting prices, offering a vast range of goods and services from clothes and kitchenware to estate agency work. 'The Universal Provider' became one of his slogans. 'Everything from a pin to an Elephant' was another. And they were true. Customers loved him but

nothing could stop him. In 1885 he achieved his ultimate dream - the most comprehensive department store of its time, with a staff of 6,000 people and in 1896 he earned an unsolicited Royal Warrant from Queen Victoria - an unprecedented achievement. In 1899 the business, of which the profits then, averaged over £100,000 per annum, was turned into a limited liability company, with Whiteley retaining the bulk of the shares.

However, tragedy was to strike. In 1907 a man claiming to be his illegitimate son murdered William Whiteley in his store. With his death the great entrepreneurial impetus that had created the empire faltered. His two sons endeavoured to keep their father's dream alive. In 1912 the Lord Mayor of London officially opened the new Whiteleys. However, by 1927 it had been sold to Gordon Selfridge, one of Whiteley's greatest admirers.

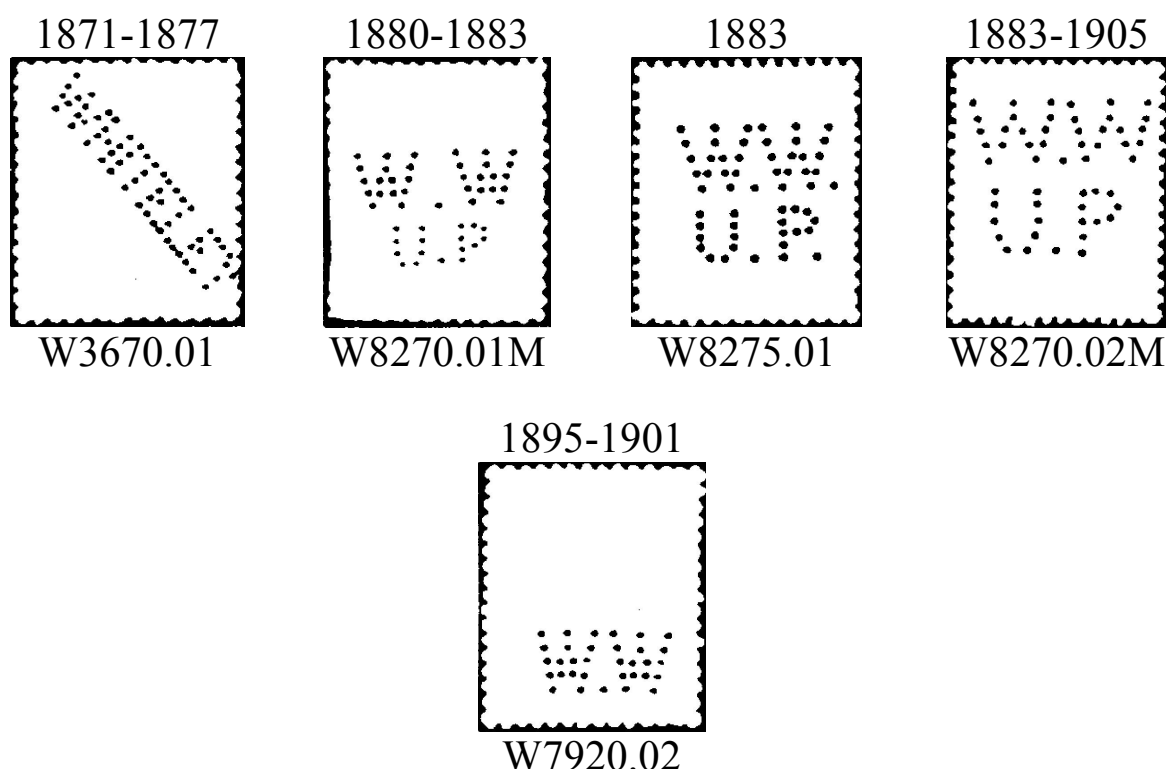


After the Second World War times changed and so did the tide of shoppers who had come to Whiteleys' doors. Bayswater became a backwater. The West End became the new shopping Mecca. Gradually, inexorably, Whiteleys declined and

in 1981 Whiteleys closed its doors. A great chapter in modern retailing had come to an end.

The Whiteleys Partnership purchased the building in February 1986, and renovated the Belcher building; retained and refurbished the Grade II listed facade and demolished the later, and less significant, additions. The Standard Life Assurance Company purchased the building from The Whiteleys Partnership in April 1987 and is now responsible for its management. A new Whiteleys shopping center opened its doors on 26th July 1989.

Whiteleys was a prolific user of perfin. Five dies are listed in the New Illustrated Catalogue as confirmed or provisionally identified Whitely perfins. The dies shown below span the hay-day of the Whiteleys store. Whiteley was obviously proud of the slogan “Universal Provider” and used the initials on his perfins. It also appears that perfin use at the store may have ended with the death of William Whiteley in 1907.



There are a number of other dies known used in Paddington that may have been used by Whiteleys. These include

W7920.03	W.W	1870-76
W7920.04	W.W	1912-15
W7940.01	W.W.	1870-76